

"Worship and Bow Down"

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
August 4, 2019

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 95:1-7

New Testament Lesson: Ephesians 1:3-6

Writing in Christian Century magazine, Eugene Peterson told about a young man in his congregation named Johnny Bergman. "He and his wife were enthusiastic participants," said Peterson, "but then the weeds of worldly care choked their young faith." A house full of children, rapid success and wealth, boats and cars, house-building and social engagements had them "worshiping less and less, and then not at all."

After a two-year absence, Johnny returned one bright, Epiphany Sunday. Surprised to see him, Peterson asked, "What brought you to worship today?" Johnny said, "I woke this morning feeling so good, so blessed, so alive – so created – I just had to say thank you, and this is the only place I could think of to say it adequately. I wanted to say it to Jesus."¹

I wanted to say thank you to Jesus. This raises the question, why do we come to worship? Anybody? Why do you come to worship? ... OK. Now, what is central to your being here? What – if it were missing – would lessen your experience of worship, make it less fulfilling? So there are lots of reasons we come to worship – to be with friends and family, to give back by preparing our children for a life of faith and service, for the music, prayers and Gospel message. And most importantly, for God.

Most importantly for God? Do we really have God at the center of our worship experience, or do we let other things take precedence, so that if the music isn't perfect, the message misses the mark, some of our favorite people are no longer with us, well then, we begin drifting away – in our hearts, if not also in our attendance.

The Psalm we're focusing on today, Psalm 95, is a great way to fortify our worship experience, to enrich it so that we remain connected to what's truly important in worship, connected to God. Our reading today invites us to consider why God is central to our worship. It begins by reaffirming God's central place in worship – that it's not about us, not about the quality of the music or the poignancy of the message, not about who's here and who's not. It's about God. The Psalmist calls out to us, saying, "Come, ... sing to the Lord; ... make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! ... Come into his presence with thanksgiving; ... with songs of praise!"

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, "Birth," Christian Century, January 6-13, 1999, 27.

In other words, our singing is for the Lord, not for us. When we raise our voices in song, we sing to the Lord – not to our own critical ears. Can't carry a tune? Me either? But thankfully, when we sing to God, God hears a heavenly chorus, and not Pastor Dave. God listens with ears tuned to our joy and faithfulness and not our self-criticism and fear. So why not sing out; let God hear how happy you are to be here, assuming you are happy to be here. Remember? That's the point of this sermon. Breathing life into the joy we bring to our worship experience.

To help us be joyful in our worship, the Psalmist speaks of thanksgiving, a Spirit of thanksgiving that overflows, that spills out into our worship of God. It's that type of thanksgiving that brought Johnny Bergman back to Eugene Peterson's church.

If you don't feel thankful today, can't bring yourself to a place of joy and thanksgiving, then please, after worship, come to me and say, "Pastor Dave, can we talk." Because you know what? I get it. Life is hard. Emotional, spiritual and physical struggles take hold of us and block our sense of joy and thanksgiving.

But I am here to tell you – God is here to tell you – you are loved and appreciated, gifted and valued, and in that there is joy for you and thanksgiving to God. Let me help you remember and hold on to that, after worship, if you're feeling the need in any way, feeling less than.

The Psalmist, having called us to worship with joy and thanksgiving, the Psalmist then points us to the object of our worship. Again, this is not the choir and hymns and organ music, not the pastor and our sermon message, not those gathered around you or those no longer here. The object of our worship is God.

The Psalmist calls us to worship in joy and thanksgiving, saying, "For the Lord is a great god, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed."

In other words, God is in everything around us, God is here for us. God is here no matter how low we get, no matter how lofty our goals and aspirations. God can handle the roughest seas we might face, the roughest things that come our way. And God breathes new life into the driest, deadest parts of our existence.

God is worthy of our worship, today and everyday. As the Psalmist says, God is like a great King, the leader and defender of our lives. God is trustworthy beyond our wildest hopes and dreams, worthy of our respect, more powerful than anything in all the earth, any trouble or

fear we might be facing. And benevolent – God is giving of himself for our sake and for our salvation, for our wellbeing.

What are we to do in the face of such a God as this? “... Come,” says the Psalmist, “let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand.”

As Presbyterians, when we hear a call to worship, to bow down, to kneel, well, we don’t do a lot of kneeling, do we? As Americans, we don’t do a lot of bowing down – no royal family to receive our stately bow or courtesy. And as people living in America today, well for many, even worship has lost its luster, its depth of meaning, its true purpose. As a society, and in some ways as churches and congregations, we’ve lost touch with what it means to worship God. We’ve made it more about us than about God. And that’s a dangerous place to be.

Psalm 95 concludes with a warning about losing touch with God, with our joyful, thankful, worshipful relationship with God. I didn’t read this part earlier because I wanted to share it with you now.

The Psalmist gives voice to God’s warning to us, saying, “Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.” What are we to make of such a warning?

Well, the word Meribah means quarreling and Massah means testing. God is referring to the Israelites who argued with Moses about the lack of water in the wilderness, as if God would not provide, as if God did not have their backs, as if God was not to be trusted. So I ask you, do you trust God, or not?

Do you live in fear about how things are these days – whatever struggles you have, whatever trouble you see in this world, or do you live in hope? We can either respond with fear or with faith.

When we live into fear and despair, it separates us from God. If that describes you, God is calling you back, reaching out to you like the benevolent, powerful, trustworthy guide and provider that he is for you, for us. God is calling us back to the heart of worship.

“O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God” – worthy to be praised – “and we are (his) people,” guided and cared for by his loving, wise, and all-powerful hand. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Pastor: God whose love reaches to the highest heavens ...

1 Voice: ... how can we keep silent?

Pastor: God whose righteousness stands like the tallest mountain ...

2 Voices: ... how can we keep silent?

Pastor: God whose justice is deeper than any ocean ...

3 Voices: ... how can we keep silent?

Pastor: God whose grace flows like a never-ending river ...

4 Voices: ... how can we keep silent?

Pastor: How can we not proclaim your majesty from generation to generation? How can we not raise the lamp of your salvation for all the world to see?

All Voices: God whose love reaches to the highest Heavens, we praise your mighty name!

Pastor: We praise your name, O Lord, and we lift our prayers to you for those devastated by gun violence. We pray also for those in need who we continue to keep in prayer. We lift up prayers of joy for the birth of Layla Faye Smith, great-granddaughter of Bill and Judy Lewis.

We praise your name, O Lord, as we pray the prayer that you taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;**

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.